**Luke 23:39-43**; Passion Reading Mark 14:1-26 Feb 25, 2015

**Does God Want Me?**

Dear Friends In Christ,

 What his crime was, we will never know, but it must have been quite bad. Two things tell us this. First of all, this man was crucified. The Romans did not crucify just anyone. They only crucified the worst of the worst. In fact, crucifixion was so terrible that the Romans declared that a Roman citizen could not be crucified. It was a punishment reserved only for non-Romans. So, that this man hung there tells us he must have done something bad. The second reason we know his crime was bad is that he admitted it! He was up on a cross dying slowly and painfully and he said, ***“We are getting what our sins deserve”*** (41). By now you know I am not talking about Jesus, but one of the men crucified with him. He must have been a bad man! I don’t think I would have welcomed him into my living room off the street, much less wanted to meet him in a dark alley.

 This bad man had run up against the full force of Roman law and he began to see things clearly. After a life of sin he suddenly admitted, “Yes, I deserve this.” Does God want people like that?

 There are many things in life we can be thankful for, but which we would ever never ask for. I remember a woman in Zambia who said, “If I weren’t struck blind while attending the university, I wouldn’t be going to heaven.” For this man, it was his crucifixion.

 Somehow he knew who was there on a cross next to him, Jesus of Nazareth. That might seem a stretch, but remember that, like all ancient cities, Jerusalem was very small in area. The great city of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day covered all of one-half of a square mile, no more than a large corn field in Kentucky. So if this criminal had spent any time in Jerusalem in the past three years, he certainly would have heard of Jesus, and very likely even listened to him. Or maybe this criminal simply heard things about Jesus while up there on the cross. Somehow he knew Jesus.

 And so while he confessed his own guilt, with a nod of the head he said, ***“But this man [Jesus] has done nothing wrong.”*** He looked at his own life and then at Jesus and he was shocked. Not only did Jesus not deserve to be on a cross, he didn’t even deserve a slap on the wrist. No crimes deserving death, prison or a fine. You know you can be fined for changing lanes in your car without using your turn signal. Jesus hadn’t even done that. He hadn’t forgotten a homework assignment when he was a child. He had done nothing even the least bit improper, and yet he was crucified.

 When we are around people from a totally different level of society, some of us at least get kind of uneasy, nervous. People who are way richer or more important, having great leadership skills or beauty – such people are intimidating. But this criminal, knowing that he is the scum of the earth and that Jesus is the Gift of Heaven, somehow had the guts to say to Jesus, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”*** (42).

 If anyone had reason to ask, “Does God Want Me?”, it would have been this man. In fact, I think that is the question he was asking, just with different words: “Does God want me? ***Jesus, remember me!”***

 About the saddest thing we hear is people who have this sick, deranged thought, “I am going to take as many with me as I can.” They have no hope in life, which is its own tragedy. So they decide to take their own life – another tradgedy. But worst of all they think, “Let me take out as many as I can.” People so selfish, that they insist on spreading their misery to as many lives as they can. Jesus is sort of like that. As his death quickly approached, he kept on grabbing as many people as he could—to take them with him to his own kingdom; not to spread the misery, but to rescue them from misery. So when this lost, terrible sinner sees himself and Jesus sliding toward death’s doorway, he cries out, *“I don’t know if God wants me.* ***Jesus, remember me.”***And Jesus replies, ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”***

 I have heard many people, surprisingly many, say, “I have done so many bad things. I don’t know if God wants me.” Some of these people have indeed done bad things. And if we were to try telling them, “That’s okay. It wasn’t really all that bad,” it would leave them thinking, “But you don’t know. I *have* done some *really* bad things.” If you ever have someone like that before you, don’t minimize their sins. Because sin is bad and God hates sin. When they ask, “Can God ever love me?” take them to those two crosses (not just Jesus’ cross) and look at the man on the side and remember he was the worst of the worst, and listen to Jesus tell him, ***“I tell you the truth. You will be with me in paradise.”***

 You know what, it might not hurt each of us to go back and eavesdrop on that conversation from time to time. Listen to the conversation between the two crucified men and remember that Jesus’ love is for all sinners.

 In Jesus’ words, there is one unusual word he used. It is the word ***“paradise.”*** For as much as we may have heard it, the word is rarely used in the Bible. In fact, this is the first time it is used in the entire Bible. The more common use of “paradise” for a Jew of Jesus’ day was to talk about the Garden of Eden.

 To a criminal suffering on a cross, paradise (the Garden of Eden) would be the exact opposite of his reality. Yes, a place without suffering. But it is more than that. Paradise means a return to the innocence in which God created Adam and Eve. Paradise means undoing all that had gone before: the wrong turns of life, the bad choices, the enemies made, the selfishness fulfilled, all put into fast speed rewind back to the time before it all happened—a return to innocence. Not just covering sin, but throwing it to the bottom of the ocean.

 When Jesus says to that man on the cross, ***“Today you will be with me in Paradise”*** he brings to mind a restoration of what might have been, of what should have been, of what can still be by God’s power. It is made possible because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

 There is a Bible passage later in the book of Hebrews which says, *“Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers”* (2:11). Jesus is not ashamed to call anyone “Brother,” or “Sister.” Does God want me? Does God want you? Does God want to save the worst criminal you will ever hold a conversation with? Only listen to Jesus’ words to all who turn to him, ***“I tell you the truth… you will be with me in paradise.”*** Amen.